R. W. L. Moberly’s *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* presents a wise and informed reading of the book of Genesis for both church and the world. Moberly is Professor of Theology and Biblical Interpretation at Durham University and the author of many scholarly books and essays.

*The Theology of the Book of Genesis* is the second volume to appear in the series *Old Testament Theology* edited by Brent A. Strawn and Patrick D. Miller. The series aims to provide a setting for extended theological reflection on the books of the Old Testament. The series aims to take seriously the “postmodern” hermeneutic climate, the diversity of readers practicing biblical interpretation, and the growing trend of interdisciplinary studies.

Moberly masterfully embodies the goals of the series and sets the bar high for future volumes. *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* contains twelve chapters. Chapter 1, “What Is a ‘Theology of Genesis?’” allows Moberly to address contemporary issues confronting the discipline of biblical theology and to locate his own reading strategy within the discipline. Moberly’s approach is canonical. He reads the various texts of Genesis carefully within their literary and historical contexts but also with an eye to the wider
Moberly's approach influences his selection of texts. He engages the expected texts in Genesis such as Gen 1, Gen 3, and Gen 12:3, but he moves into the exegesis of the texts through the interpretations of contemporary writers, many of whom are not biblical scholars. Often he begins with a controversial question or author such as the scientist and polemicist Richard Dawkins. This allows Moberly to read Genesis in light of questions generated from a “hermeneutic of suspicion” and presses him to engage the text with issues confronting life in the twenty-first century. The resulting readings are rich, thought-provoking, and free of both simplistic Christian apologetics and academic reflection detached from contemporary concerns.

In chapter 2, “On Reading Genesis 1–11,” Moberly confronts the historical-critical and literary challenges to interpreting these famously difficult passages. He finds wanting both historical-critical and premodern methods of dealing with the questions raised by these texts. The purpose of this chapter is to further argue and describe the canonical method that he will apply throughout the book. Given the diversity of the material, Moberly stresses the vital necessity of reading Genesis in its final form.

In chapter 3, “Genesis 1: Picturing the World,” Moberly reads the creation account of Gen 1 against the challenges posed by Richard Dawkins. Dawkins argues that the world as it exists calls into question the goodness of the God described in Gen 1. For Dawkins, the world is amoral. Moberly argues that the issue at stake is “how one pictures the world” (42). Genesis 1 is clearly a powerful voice for the goodness of creation. Moberly also affirms the weightiness of Dawkins’s critique that emphasizes the opposite of Gen 1: evil, suffering, and the apparent randomness of creation. The end of this is not an exegetical attempt to sidestep Dawkins but a reaffirmation of the good picture of Gen 1 within a canonical portrait that is able to hold in tension the goodness of creation with the presence and conflict of evil. Moberly depends heavily on Levenson’s *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) in his exegesis.

In chapters 4–6 (“Genesis 2–3: Adam and Eve and “the Fall”; “Genesis 4: Cain and Abel”; “Genesis 6–9: Cataclysm and Grace”) Moberly offers perceptive readings of these
theologically vital but classically difficult texts. In each chapter Moberly begins with a modern reading: James Barr’s *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) on Gen 2–3; Regina M. Schwartz’s *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006) on Gen 6–9. In response to the issues raised by these authors and in conversation with the broader interpretive tradition, Moberly demonstrates how a canonical approach offers, in his view, a better reading of the data. These chapters are a model of exegetical precision, engagement with historical-critical concerns, and the importance of one’s reading strategy.


Chapters 8 (“Genesis 12:1–3: A Key to Interpreting the Old Testament?”) and 9 (“Genesis 12:3a: A Biblical Basis for Christian Zionism?”) focus on the initial call and promises to Abraham. Moberly challenges a broad consensus that reads Gen 12:1–3 as a call for Abraham and his descendants to serve as agents of blessing for the nations. In his exegesis of 12:3a he disputes the Christian Zionist reading that argues for an unconditional support for the nation of Israel as the basis for receiving God’s blessing. In both chapters, Moberly models the tensions and hermeneutic finesse required by one who reads a text both in its literary and broader canonical context.

Chapter 10, “Genesis 22: Abraham—Model or Monster,” presents perhaps the greatest exegetical challenge to Moberly. This text has scandalized interpreters for millennia. How could a good God test Abraham in this manner? How can Abraham’s willingness to offer his own son in sacrifice serve in any way as a model for future generations of believers? Moberly recognizes the long-standing theological problem inherent in Gen 22. He argues that the problems arise principally with readers who do not take seriously its ancient cultural and literary context or who lack a religious community’s rule of faith to help shape the understanding and appropriation of this passage. For Christians, this text remains problematic, but it has always been read in light of the passion of Jesus. This is a blatant theological move, but Moberly demonstrates its warrant in light of the canon. Such a move does not remove all of the issues, but as Moberly reminds us about both Gen 22 and the passion of Jesus, “Nonetheless, Christians believe that, rightly understood and appropriated, these texts point to an entry into anguished darkness that can be a way into light and life” (199).

Chapter 11, “Abraham and the ‘Abrahamic Faiths’,“ explores the interfaith dialogue between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam under the rubric of “Abrahamic faiths.”
Moberly is critical of the approach for its shallow engagement with the text of Genesis but recognizes its popular appeal and attempts to suggest ways in which an exegesis of the Abrahamic tradition may move the conversation forward.

Chapter 12, “Genesis 37–50: Is Joseph Wise?” closes the work. In the final chapter, Moberly deploys von Rad’s “The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom” as a heuristic tool for reading the Joseph story as embodying a didactic function of teaching wisdom to the faithful. He does not try to resurrect von Rad’s historical-critical hypotheses but rather uses von Rad’s insights as a reading strategy. Thus, Moberly ends the book with a creative reuse of traditional criticism for the purposes of his postmodern hermeneutic. Moberly also includes a helpful annotated bibliography of commentaries, histories of interpretation, and theologies covering material in Genesis.

This is one of the finest works of biblical theology that I have read in some time. Moberly is a committed biblicist who is fully aware of the present contested place of the Bible in the Western world. He courageously reads the text in the presence of some of its most trenchant critics. He engages the text with exegetical aplomb. Readers will not always agree with Moberly’s conclusions. I for one remain convinced that Gen 12:3 describes the election of Israel for God’s missional aims of redeeming the nations. But no one can read The Theology of the Book of Genesis without being drawn into deep thinking about hermeneutics, the theological meaning of the Bible, and its ongoing conversation with humanity. Moberly demonstrates the power of a canonical hermeneutic rooted in a close and careful reading of the biblical text. He also shows the ongoing relevance of the enterprise when it begins with the questions and criticisms of contemporary writers and thinkers. This is Moberly at his best: independent thinking, clear exegesis, and theological sophistication.

The Theology of the Book of Genesis is suitable for college or seminary courses covering the book of Genesis, Pentateuch, or Old Testament theology. Students will learn from a wise exegete about the theological possibilities that arise from a close reading of the biblical text with eyes and ears attuned to the conversations and challenges of the world. Moreover, Moberly is an excellent writer, and the text is accessible to any reader interested in a sophisticated conversation between a Christian scholar, the text of Genesis, and life in the twenty-first century.